

World's work

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THE BRITISH CONTROL OF EGYPT

HOW IT HAS BEEN MADE SECURE BY A SYSTEM OF BENEVOLENTLY DESPOTIC RULE, THE THEORY OF WHICH SEEMS TO BE TO AVOID DIRECT ISSUES, TO SHUN ARROGANCE AND DISCRIMINATION IN FAVOR OF HOME TRADERS, TO KEEP ALOOF FROM THE NATIVE EGYPTIANS, AND TO TOLERATE THEIR IN-SOLENCE BUT TO RETAIN THEIR RESPECT BY THE UNOBTRUSIVE PRESENCE OF THE BAYONET

BY

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IN THE great Square before the Abdin Palace in Cairo, the residence of the Sultan of Egypt, several hundred native soldiers gathered on the 29th of last January. They had a complaint to make, and, following the immemorial custom of the East, they came in person to make it to their ruler. They were orderly, but persistent; they felt they had a just complaint and they intended to have it heard.

The situation was a bit tense in itself: it takes so little to start a riot among oriental people. As I stood on the edge of Abdin Square and watched the mutineers, I wondered what part they might play with their trifling complaint in the destiny of nations. I suspected they would play none, and that is the burden of the story of the British control over Egypt.

These soldiers were reservists who had served their five years in the Egyptian army and had been recently recalled to assist in protecting Egypt from invasion. However, they were not given arms but were called upon to tend camels. To this they objected, partly because they felt that, as soldiers, they should have the dignity of carrying arms, partly because volunteers who were doing the same work were receiving seven piasters a day while they were receiving only their army pay of two piasters. They happened to be stationed only a few miles out of Cairo, so they packed their belongings one morning and left in a body for the Sultan's palace.

They might have been fired upon and turned back. It would probably happen to any European regiment that disobeyed orders. But, though they passed down a

road bordered by many thousand British soldiers, they were allowed to come right into Cairo without being stopped. Merely the mounted native police of Cairo were ordered out to escort them. However, they gave the police the slip and suddenly appeared, a motley army, with bundles on their backs, before the palace gate.

That afternoon and the next morning I saw the best and the worst of the British control over Egypt. The only action of the police on the first afternoon was to close the streets leading off the Square to prevent the gathering of a crowd. The rebellious reservists were listened to. The Prime Minister came out of the palace to talk to them. An hour passed in useless harangue. Two passed. The reservists were holding their ground. It was agreed they need not return to the camel camp pending a discussion of their rights, but meanwhile they had been talking themselves into a state of excitement. Time had come for action, and the native police, under the command of their chief, Colonel Harvey, formerly an officer in the Black Watch and known throughout Egypt as Harvey Pasha, stopped all the street cars passing in an adjoining thoroughfare, loaded in the mutineers, and took them off to barracks.

The next morning some of them gathered before the palace again, accompanied by other Egyptians whose sympathies they had worked upon overnight. They were carrying *nabouts*, long staves of ancient origin, and were much more unruly. Still the police let them have their way and, rather than complicate matters by making arrests, finally withdrew at noon, leaving

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the reservists to air their grievance to the empty sky or to the stolid Nubian guards who sat their horses like statues during the whole affair.

But the police had no sooner withdrawn than twenty luckless mounted English yeomen, part of a command ordered to be handy to the Square but to remain outside, crossed the foot of the Square. The reservists, who had begun to feel rather flat, felt they could save their dignity by swooping down upon the yeoman. They surrounded the yeomen in no time, gesticulating with their *nabouls* and screaming as the Egyptians scream about all things. The yeomen felt they were attacked and fired. That started real trouble for the moment, and one yeoman caught in a corner had to empty his revolver into the crowd to get away. Altogether the Square was filled with what I could not help feeling was absurd, unnecessary excitement brought on by stupidity. That there were eight seriously wounded men on the ground only aggravated the stupidity of it.

THE BRITISH METHOD OF EMPIRE BUILDING

Officers I knew who were there looking on, officers who had not seen the affair, English members of the civil government all openly condemned the shooting, regarding it as a silly mistake. That was what interested me most. They did not accept the accomplished fact in silence, as the Egyptians did. They sympathized with the reservists and condemned the yeomen in unmeasured terms. I was not prepared for this attitude of mind, but I found it enlightening. It showed me how the British make a success of empire building by avoiding issues, and how, at the same time, stupidity has marked the Empire's history with tragic spots. Fortunately this was not an affair of great moment. The civilian English hardly talked about it, but officially it created a stir. It would not do to have that kind of thing in Egypt.

At the time this happened, there was so large a force of British soldiers in Egypt that the native population could not have resisted if it had so desired. But that was not the point. That incident showed me a good deal about the British method of

control. They do not want to rule by force, or even the show of force, and they are evidently willing to go to great lengths to avoid using force.

One needs but to walk about Cairo to see the workings of British control. In the very centre of the city, surrounded by wealth and squalor in picturesque contrast, is the magnificent palace of the Sultan. He lives in regal state and everything from the smart guard of tall Nubians to the elegant French limousines in which the ladies of the palace take the air exhales his splendor.

Turning from the palace and passing through that part of Cairo where the veneer of European civilization lies thickest, you arrive, after a mile or so, before a handsome residence of simple but dignified outline with a British Tommy before the gate. It is the British Residency, the house of the High Commissioner, Sir Henry McMahon.

When I first called at the Residency, I was ushered into a large waiting room of dignified proportions, and, even in the few moments I was there, the impression of the room sank into me. It was expensively simple. The colors were subdued. On the backs of the chairs were the British crown and the regal initials. At the end of the hall, the one striking thing in the room, was a portrait of King George V.

The effect of the room was so intensely English it could not escape you. But by the time I was conscious of it, my eye was attracted by the broad French windows slightly raised above a garden of oriental shrubs and flowers, handled formally as an English gardener would do it, leaving an avenue through which I could see the Nile flowing past the foot of the garden and the fringe of palms beyond.

I could not help wondering whether this was not staged, designed to give visiting Egyptian officials a feeling of the cool strength of the British Empire.

SIR HENRY McMAHON

The personality of the High Commissioner, the first to hold that office in Egypt, fits perfectly into the picture. His manner is cool and deliberate, but his is not the deliberation that comes from conscious-

ness of power. His calmness is not due to the hundreds of thousands of British soldiers in Egypt. I soon discovered that if his manner was deliberate his mind is active and open. I can hardly express my impression of his mentality better than by saying I was not with him five minutes before I felt I could say without reservation what came into my mind. I found in him that tolerance of honest opinion characteristic of statesmen. He spoke to me frankly of many things, but, as I left, he contrived to send with me a thought he did not implant by accident. When I tried to sum up in my mind the things he had said, the first thing that occurred to me was that he had expressed a very high opinion of the character and abilities of the Sultan.

THE SULTAN OF EGYPT

Several days later the Sultan granted me an interview; at least that is what I expected. I really had an audience in which I was questioned keenly about the state of public opinion in Europe and America. I had prepared questions in advance, of course, and I was under the impression at the time that he had answered them, but when I tried to pick out the salient points afterward, I found I had hardly any more to put down than that he was quite happy, that Egypt was happy, or ought to be, and that he entertained a very complimentary opinion of the character and abilities of the High Commissioner.

These two men can govern Egypt only by a system of mutual respect, and both are clever enough to realize it. Fortunately, in this case this has cost no effort, for it is evident that each regards the other with not only mutual respect but with affection. There is no question where the power lies, especially since the protectorate has been declared. The British are in a position to do what they like with Egypt, but evidently what they wish is simply to keep Egypt contented.

I tried to discover any trace of discontent in the Sultan, but if he feels he is an English-made potentate he is able to hide it from prying eyes. I did not find the Sultan at all what I expected. Know-

ing that he was the son of the regal Ismail Pasha, the Khedive who both made and ruined modern Egypt, and the grandson of Muhammed Ali, the Albanian adventurer who founded the Khedivate in Egypt, I was not prepared to meet a man whose dominant characteristic is a spiritual intellectualism. He wanted to talk chiefly about the uplifting of Egyptian women, and, as he talked, he was emotionally moved. He turned also to Islam and tried to make me understand the sentiments of fraternity and democracy that underlie the religion of Mohammed. He spoke of politics, too, and did not mind being pinned down to an expression of opinion on British rule. He found it, he said, firm, but liberal. But when I questioned him about the future of Egypt he smiled and said, "But that is politics, and I am no prophet."

FOR A UNITED ISLAM

Except for the fact that there are Englishmen as directing heads of all civil departments in Egypt, the interior government is left to the Sultan and his ministers. He is ruler of the Egyptians; but when it comes to Egypt's relations with the rest of the world, the power lies where the arms lie, in British hands. This was a point I approached cautiously in interviewing the Sultan, but my caution was wasted.

"The power of empire has passed westward hundreds of years ago," he said in answer to an indirect question. "The movement is too vast to combat. So we in the East can hope only for a union of the Islamic countries, and that is more a matter of religion than of politics."

The interview, incidentally, was in French. The Sultan does not speak English. The prevalence of the French language and French customs brings out in higher relief the whole story of British control. You see it in everything, and it gives a sharp defining line by which you can see the British Empire in the making. The protectorate is so new that even the British officials watch its workings as if it were an act in a drama. The effort is obviously to make the protectorate as palatable as possible for the Egyptians.

For that matter England has always had a policy in Egypt which was at least meant to be free from arrogance. I have heard Englishmen of the interior trading type complain bitterly that they had been discriminated against by their own Government, while traders of other nations have been able, under the international control exercised in Egypt for thirty years, to do what they liked. Englishmen have certainly been kept under close watch. Those who would not behave themselves have been packed off home. England has had too much at stake in Egypt to take any chances. It has given interior trading almost entirely into the hands of Greeks, and when the war began more than 70 per cent. of the cheap imports of Egypt used by the natives were from German manufacturers.

WHY ENGLAND MADE A SULTAN

Up to the time the protectorate was declared England's interest in Egypt was largely on account of its geographical position commanding the gateway to the East. Before the Sudan was conquered even that interest flagged. France might have taken over Egypt twice, and it was even offered to Turkey. But this was under Gladstone, when the British Empire as such languished. Following the South African War and the conquering of the Sudan, England became firmly established in Egypt. It had come to stay. The protectorate had existed in fact long before it was proclaimed by law, and the political issue was avoided when it was proclaimed, because the Khedive happened to be in Constantinople when the war broke out. The British took prompt advantage of this lucky accident and, as the country had to have a ruler, made a Sultan, free from Turkish control, of the Khedive's uncle. He was chosen because he was friendly to British rule.

"We might have annexed Egypt," said a high British official whom I am not privileged to quote by name. "It would hardly have been noticed in the greater events of the war, and as it was our duty to protect Egypt against the Turks, we had a right to do so. But I am glad we did not. It would have saddened the

whole Eastern world. We hope to smash Turkey's power, and it is the last important temporal power left to Islam, except Afghanistan, which is too remote to play a large part in world politics. So, by merely declaring a protectorate over Egypt, we have freed the country from Turkish influence, and Egypt, under its own Sultan, has become a great Mohammedan temporal power. Mussulmans do not feel we mean to crush them. In fact, we have no such purpose. We hope merely to shift the temporal power to Egypt, the old geographical centre of the Mohammedan races."

The larger political aspect dominates. The British can afford to be tolerant, and they permit many things to go on which would seem to indicate weakness if it were not for the big armies camped over hundreds of square miles. The noses of Egyptians are not snubbed up close to the hitching-post. They do pretty much what they like. Once recently an attempt was made to enlist the younger fellahin in a volunteer army corps, and, for convenience, the enlisting took place in the public markets. At one town two hundred had given in their names and were officially recruited, when the report was spread among them that they were to be sent away from Egypt. At once the two hundred bolted, literally dashed through the market, upsetting produce baskets, smashing eggs, stampeding donkeys and camels, and bowling over women carrying huge loads on their heads. Many people were hurt and the recruits might readily have been punished. Instead, a mere statement was issued denying the rumor and inviting the recruits to return. Hardly any came, and no attempt was made to follow up the others.

A SHOW OF FORCE—AND ITS EFFECT

The British can afford to be easy-going: their power is so obvious. But at the beginning it was necessary to make a show of force, and the first 25,000 men landed in Egypt after the beginning of the war were paraded before the eyes of the people. They passed, horse, foot, artillery, and supply train, through the native quarters of Cairo, and it took five hours for them

to pass. The rumbling had not ceased before the malcontents knew their game was up. There is no place where power is accepted more quickly and completely than in the East.

A similar demonstration of power was given after the Abdin Palace affair. Troops stirred about everywhere, and occasion was found to drag cannon through streets which had not seen cannon for years. It had the subtle psychological effect intended, and all danger of an outbreak was averted.

Officially the native power in Egypt is enthroned, but Englishmen as a race remain aloof. They regard the Egyptians as a backward race, and treat them so openly. The effect of this cuts both ways. Educated Egyptians and the officials of Turkish descent fret under the implied snub, but the fellahin and the Arab population of the towns feel only the sovereign power and they like the strong hand which does not prey on them.

ENGLAND'S SECRET OF SUCCESS

One day recently I fell into a casual conversation with a British officer on a street car in Cairo, and he pointed a moral from this attitude.

"We are successful with native peoples because we remain aloof. They feel our power, and our aloofness makes us seem more powerful yet. They also know we mean to treat them fairly and prevent oppression. That is why we can govern countries like India and Egypt. We do not force our customs on them, and we have no wish to adopt theirs. The French are less successful because they mix. They do not remain aloof. Their democracy is fatal. Mind you, I admire the democracy of the French. Nothing that you or we have can compare to the democracy of the French, but it is fatal to empire. Look at Cairo. What there is European about it is French, French signs, French customs, the universal language is French. You rarely heard English here before the war. There are now a hundred schools teaching French to half a dozen teaching English. But who is governing Egypt? Not the French. We, who have made no impression on the daily life of Egypt ex-

cept indirectly through public works, we are governing Egypt."

It is interesting to watch in operation the contradiction between the British official and the actual British attitude. Egypt has really been in the palm of England's hand since the burning of Alexandria in 1882, when Tewfik Pasha, the Khedive, drove to the British garrison and placed his person under the protection of the British commander. The battle that followed at Tell-el-Kebir and the surrender of the Citadel at Cairo merely established the power. England could have done what it liked with Egypt at any time since, but, instead, it has permitted its influence to be buffeted about. Nominally all the Powers, through their diplomatic agents, have had a hand in Egyptian affairs and they have not failed to assert themselves. When Kitchener first came to Egypt he had no more legal power than any one of seventeen consuls, and, being the last, he was made to feel his place.

Under the Capitulations, framed when the Controllers assumed charge of Egyptian affairs in 1879, subjects and citizens of foreign countries in Egypt are responsible only to their own governments. This has made of Egypt the happy hunting ground of international adventurers. Before the war, law frequently went for naught, and the English endured this state of affairs because they felt it to be good policy not to raise the issue. But British officials have welcomed martial law. One said to me, "We can actually police this country now." So far the status of the Capitulations has not been decided upon. Again the policy of the British of avoiding embarrassing issues. But it is safe to say that the power of the consuls has gone for good.

LITTLE DANGER OF REVOLUTION

The military situation, which attracted me to Egypt, I found to be the least important. It is simple and is not subject to much change. The delta of the Nile, inhabited by fellahin, is productive of neither good military nor revolutionary material. It is content to be protected and lorded over by British troops. The

fighting spirit is among the Bedouins of the desert, particularly the Senussi to the west. German and Turkish influence has been exerted among them, and they were led to believe they could back the English to the seashore as they did with the Italians in Tripoli. They soon found they could not do it, as the British troops had garrisoned the oases, and were in Egypt in such large numbers as to make a desert attack on them impossible. The Egyptian Government has also assumed an attitude that the Senussi are not really unfriendly, and, while tribes under Senussi influence have fought several lively desert battles with British troops, blame has never been placed on the Grand Senussi, the head of the jesuitical religious order to which they all belong, and, even at the time of these minor battles, correspondence and even personal communication with him has continued unbroken.

THE SUEZ CANAL SAFE

The only other military danger to the quiet of Egypt is an attack on the Suez Canal, and my observations in Egypt lead me to the belief that the Canal cannot be successfully attacked, as long as there are anywhere near as many soldiers in Egypt as at present. The Canal is fortified for a long distance to the eastward, the only direction from which an attack can come, and, as the Mediterranean and the Red Sea form the ends of the British lines, it is impossible to turn the British flank. That leaves the only military possibility a direct attack against prepared defenses close to the base, while the attacking party must bring ammunition and supplies, notably water, for more than a hundred miles across a desert. So the military advantages are all in favor of the British and will probably remain so until the end of the war. The Turks may make an attack even before this is printed, but it can hardly succeed, and, if made, the purpose of it will probably be merely a show of force for political effect upon the desert tribes.

The Sudan has played so large a part in the news for twenty years, one naturally expects it to be an important element in the Egyptian military situation. It is, in a static way. It is absolutely dominated by the British Sirdar, and that is the whole story.

NATIONALISM NOT AN ISSUE

I expected to find in Egypt an influential nationalist party, but it hardly exists, even as a sentiment. There are malcontents, many of them, but they are only in a few instances Egyptians. They are of Turkish blood who came to Egypt under the Khedivate. They talk hotly against the English, but, sifted down, I found their complaint to be chiefly that the English treat them as inferiors, which is galling to a proud race. But they prefer to submit to it rather than have the Turks again to rule over them.

Nationalism is not an issue. Feeling is not sufficiently coherent, and the people of the Delta care only for their land and cannot be moved politically. They could never be stirred even in the past when they were mistreated, unjustly taxed, and kicked about. Now they have fair treatment and are let alone. I should call them the most hopeless revolutionary material I have ever seen.

But the British control is not absolute. The other European Powers still have a finger, at least, on Egypt. France has stuck to the letter of the Capitulations, and has still a considerable influence. It is, in fact, a bit jealous of England's influence in the land which Napoleon said should always be French, a jealousy that has not been entirely cured by the war. It has done nothing to embarrass its ally, of course. In fact it has been of real assistance, but is not prone to give up its few remaining prerogatives. For instance, when I finish what I am now writing in Alexandria, I shall, on account of the uncertain condition of the mails, put on one copy French stamps and mail it in the French post office of Alexandria.